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## Old Town park's turnaround specialist

By [Lori Weisberg](#), UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Chuck Ross, seen here with Casa de Reyes restaurant in the background, has worked to reinvigorate Old Town State Historic Park since taking over the concession last year.

### CHUCK ROSS

Owner, Old Town Family Hospitality Corp. and South Bay Fish & Grill/San Diego Catering Concepts in Chula Vista.

**Personal:** Born in 1956 in Syracuse, N.Y. Married with two sons.

**Education:** Three years of college at the University of Florida.

**Work experience:** Baja Fresh joint-venture partner and franchisee, 1998 to 2004. Formerly owned the Boathouse Restaurant on Harbor Island. Director of operations for Hard Rock Cafe, 1985 to 1994. Group director of operations for the General Mills Restaurant Group, 1974 to 1984.

When businessman Chuck Ross agreed late last year to take over Old Town State Historic Park's largest concession, he faced monumental challenges in turning around what once had been a hugely popular retail and dining destination.

Previous operator Delaware North, which in 2005 won the rights to the state contract on Diane Powers' long-running Bazaar del Mundo operation, saw revenue decline precipitously and ultimately turned over the concession to Ross' Old Town Family Hospitality Corp., with the state's blessing.

Powers held the concession for 33 years. She relocated her Bazaar del Mundo shops just outside the park.

While Ross acknowledges that there is still much to be done to reinvigorate the Old Town complex of shops and eateries, especially amid a deep economic downturn, he says he is eager to implement changes that will endear the area to locals.

Since Ross formally took over in March, he has built up a stable of 16 retailers, nine of which he brought in after Delaware North departed.

Two of the concession's principal restaurants, Casa de Reyes and Barra Barra Saloon (formerly the Jolly Boy Saloon), have undergone substantial renovation and menu changes in an effort to enliven them.

Ross also points out that revenue from his Fiesta de Reyes concession is up nearly 14 percent from July to November, compared with a year earlier, when Delaware North was the operator.

Ross spoke last week about his new ventures and his expectations for the future.

**QUESTION:** What drove your decision to take over an ailing business with so many challenges?

**ANSWER:** The biggest reason really was the opportunity I saw to improve something that all of San Diego really wants to love and cherish. What happened before us taking over the business was such a negative situation for San Diego. People were mad.

The biggest challenge was the public perception of what Old Town had turned into, from what it used to be. Our challenge was to improve that image and bring people back. Local San Diegans had stopped bringing their out-of-town friends and family to Old Town, which they had done religiously for years and years.

**QUESTION:** What were the negative changes during the Delaware North regime?

**ANSWER:** Lack of color, lack of quality and lack of excitement. All those are things we work on every day to win back San Diegans.

**QUESTION:** You initially hosted a number of citizen advisory meetings to guide you as you reinvented

the concession. What were the biggest issues that came up during those gatherings?

**ANSWER:** One of the biggest issues was the name needed to change from Plaza del Pasado. We brought up three choices of names, and Fiesta de Reyes was one most accepted. We didn't try to preach, but we did try to make available the historic aspect if people wanted to go that route, while also having a very aesthetically pleasing, high-quality operation encompassing food and retail that people can gravitate to.

People also wanted to add color and excitement, so the idea was to add different flags from different parts of the world because those were our trading partners from the 1800s. We have about 14 flags that hang throughout the plaza, and we have different murals and paintings specific to the 1800s that add a lot of character.

**QUESTION:** Many of the original retailers lost their leases when Powers' Bazaar del Mundo went away. How successful have you been in recruiting some of them to return?

**ANSWER:** This is an area I'm most proud of. When I knew this was a reality, I called Brian Miller, who owns Geppetto's and had been here throughout the Diane Powers era. I called him and told him what our vision was, and within a week, Brian was signed up and ready to go. He went back into his original space and had been gone during the Delaware North time.

In a five-week period, we were able to sign up eight retailers. The retail businesses (not including food and beverage) are up 35 percent from last year.

**QUESTION:** Why do you believe you've been able to succeed where Delaware North could not?

**ANSWER:** We're on our path to success, but it's a process that will take some years. When you go from \$28 million a year in total sales at the peak to around \$7 million with Delaware North, it's not going to turn around overnight. It's a horrible economy, yet we're up in retail and food and beverage. That's our measuring stick every day. We also look at comment cards. We have tons of cards from people telling us they love what we've done. We've brought back the color, the quality, the music. We have an active schedule with music, plays and events. We do promotions that attract locals, like Loco for Locals. It's a \$10 dinner and a margarita for anyone who's a resident.

It's not always that easy. The height of tourism in the state park was 2000. The low is going to be 2009, so there are challenges with that.

**QUESTION:** When you took over from Delaware North, it was reported that you were not required to pay the company any money to assume its contract. In addition, Delaware North was responsible for paying a portion of the now \$2.2 million in yearly rent to the state that isn't covered by revenue brought in by the concession's shops and restaurants. How helpful have those concessions been in making the business financially viable?

**ANSWER:** Very helpful, because any of the businesses that show an increase in sales over prior years will generate more rent dollars, and they'll be personally successful, and that will also help in the success of Fiesta del Reyes. Delaware North is paying for completion of the Cosmopolitan Hotel, and they're obligated to contribute \$7.5 million in rent guarantees over the next six years. The rent guarantees were a necessity because the business was a failed business. There was no way for the rent to

be paid to the state any other way.

**QUESTION:** Can you give us some examples of changes you've made and what future improvements are in store for the concession?

**ANSWER:** In Casa de Reyes, the larger outdoor restaurant, the shade structure was completely taken down and replaced with a new arbor, and there are new fire pits, torches, furniture and umbrellas, décor from Mexico and cactus landscaping. Barra Barra, which is a separate restaurant outside of our plaza, was redone to depict an old-world saloon and includes artifacts from Mexico. Menus at both the restaurants are completely different. Casa de Reyes is more traditional Mexican food, and Barra Barra specializes in flatbread tacos, food from Oaxaca and San Felipe.

Construction is moving along on the Cosmopolitan Hotel, and it's scheduled to be completed in March. It will be restored back to its original days in the 1850s, with a new kitchen, bar and patio.

We've redone the stage in Casa de Reyes for the folklorico dancers and plays, and we're working on remodeling existing office space that fronts the park and turning it into retail, so it will add another 1,200 square feet of retail with a patio. We've also turned one of the old restaurants, Lino's, into La Galleria, which will open in January. It's more a museum space that could exhibit items on loan from other museums.

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